GUESS WHO'S COMING
Matthew 25:1-13
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I don't recall ever presiding at a wedding that did not include at least a minor mishap. There is something about the nature of the event that invites confusion. Even those that appear to go smoothly aren't going smoothly. It usually surfaces at the rehearsal; when the minister and organist are the only people in sight at the designated starting time. It proceeds when the best man telephones from a gas station outside Cleveland with a flat tire and no spare. It continues as the maid of honor from Cincinnati discovers that there is more than one church on Broad Street and starts on the west side trying to find us. Sometimes the license is forgotten. Sometimes the ring is dropped. Sometimes the flowers are undelivered. Sometimes the vows are unspoken, the bride unkissed, etc., etc. It's marvelous! The minor mishaps, which are ordinarily evident to no one but the guilty party, make each wedding special and memorable and human and precious. But there remains something about the event itself which invites mistakes.

Fulcrum

It has been always thus, apparently; very little new under the sun. Jesus used the age-old situation, with its propensity toward mishap, to frame a memorable story one time. Ten bridesmaids were waiting outside the bride's home to serve as her escort when the groom arrived. They fell asleep: the groom arrived: they lighted their torches and five discovered that they were out of oil. Their prudent sisters refused to share, the five scurried off to buy oil, returned to the groom's home where the feast had begun and were locked out.

In tracking down the actual customs and practices which constitute the framework of this little story I was intrigued by the following account, written in 1906, by a man who had been invited to a wedding in Jerusalem. He wrote, "In the late evening the guests were entertained in the bride's home. After they had waited for hours, the bridegroom (whose arrival had repeatedly been announced by messengers), finally appeared, half an hour before midnight. (He had been concluding the final negotiations of the marriage contract). He was conducted by his friends in a sea of lights from burning candles, and was recieved by the guests who went out to meet him. Then, in a stately procession, the wedding party, again in a flood of light, went to the bridegroom's father, where the marriage ceremony was performed and more refreshment was provided." (J. Jeremias, Rediscovering the Parables, p.137).

It was fascinating to know the authenticity of the setting in this parable. Ten bridesmaids were waiting outside the bride's home to meet the groom. Five were unprepared and missed him when he came. Five were prepared, greeted him, and joined him at the party. The early Christian Church dearly loved that little story, I am told. They fully expected Jesus to return and the world to come to an end. They identified with the waiting bridesmaids. The groom was late. They read in this parable a promise that He would come again and that they should maintain their current readiness. In the Middle Ages the story was frequently used in Mystery Plays which the clergy often performed for public entertainment. The action is easily expressed and one can almost see the way in which the sleeping bridesmaids, their consternation, and the other details would have been portrayed.

In the Gospel of Matthew the story is a signal that the Messiah had come and Jerusalem, preparing for a great celebration, was in the process of missing Him. And that, true to form, is exactly what happened.

We celebrate, today, a mishap. The bridegroom arrived and the wedding party was looking the other way. Jesus came to the city and no one noticed. There was a minor disturbance, to be sure, but the story, I am convinced, is wildly exaggerated in our imagination, music and art. The city was full of religious pilgrims and the vast majority of them had no idea that a divine-human drama was being played out in front of their eyes. He commanded some attention when He rode into town on a donkey, in the very way Israel's Messiah was supposed to come, and again when He drove the moneychangers from the Temple. He forced the Sanhedrin to acknowledge His presence and He had the attention of the Roman soldiers who actually crucified Him. But by and large the event went unnoticed, and even those who were directly involved did not recognize who He was. We celebrate a mishap on Palm Sunday.

They weren't prepared for Him. They were looking for their Messiah in the wrong places and situations. In fact, they had waited so long that waiting itself had become a kind of legitimate behavior. It was what people were supposed to do. "Waiting for the Messiah", unfortunately, had become respectable religious activity - like Bingo or attending meetings. The Messiah for whom they said they were waiting was highly stylized. He would be a revolutionary leader who could gather up the frustrated rage of the nation and strike a blow for freedom by overthrowing the Roman occupiers. At least He could demonstrate His power during the Passover and then retreat to the mountains to wage an extended guerilla war. That seems to be the precise program of an underground revolutionary organization called the Zealots. Many scholars believe that Judas was a Zealot - and hoped profoundly that Jesus of Nazareth would fulfill these particular hopes. That's the kind of man they were looking for and so they could not see the man who actually came.

Others expected at least a traditional religious figure; a new and famous Rabbi for instance, who would teach the way finally to fulfill the whole law and counsel of God. Or perhaps the Messiah would be a new High Priest, the surrogate head of state while Rome was in power. Like the bridesmaids, so busy fooling around with wedding paraphernalia that they missed the groom, Jerusalem was so busy with the paraphernalia of waiting that it missed the Messiah when He came. Nobody was looking for a carpenter from Nazareth, with His rag-tag entourage of fishermen, tax collectors and reformed prostitutes. And so they missed Him and while there was a minor commotion and some people waved palm branches, what this day is about, essentially, is a mishap; a faux pas on a grand scale.

William Stringfellow who knows a little bit about how Jesus Christ is ignored, mistaken and overlooked in the city, mainly because his Christian convictions motivated him to practice law in East Harlem, wrote: "Things have not changed much since then. The disciples of Christ today keep returning to Palm Sunday with nostalgia for the parade." (Free In Obedience, p.37).

Nostalgia for the parade, which was not a victory but a pathetic prelude to death, and two models of expectation about the presence of Jesus Christ and His kingdom which are as irrelevant and out of touch with reality as the Che Guevera hope of the Zealots twenty centureis ago. My experience is that if pushed on the issue of the Kingdom of God in the world, most people come up with an image of some kind of monarchy or a heavenly savior descending in the clouds. The monarchical model doesn't mean anything any longer. The Queen of Great Britain may be the head of the church, but no one is seriously suggesting that that means God's Kingdom is more evident there than elsewhere. The old idea of Christendom - a world kingdom under the sovereignty of Jesus Christ, died in fact, several centuries ago, although it endures in the theology of those who believe that the Kingdom of God will come if we can just get prayer back into the public schools.

The other model is even more obsolete - when Christians start talking about Jesus coming again in the clouds, and the imminent end of the age, the world simply regards the idea as curious nonsense; a world which now knows what the surface of Jupiter looks like, and which doesn't pay attention when Christianity insists on using first century language and ideas to express its hope. It has always been a problem with us - ever since the first century when Jesus didn't come again when He was supposed to. One day in 1780 darkness descended all over New England. People thought the end of the world had come. Legislators fled their desks to go outside and pray. In Edwin Markham's poetic account of the event, a Senator Davenport says:

> "Bring in the lights: let us be found
> Doing our duty's common round.
> Bring in the candles: keep to the task:
> What more can judgment and angels ask?"
> (G.A.Buttrick, The Parables, p.237).

The realities of life keep proving the relevance of the Bible. People missed Jesus Christ because they were looking for someone else. Those who expect Him most fervently, in the end of the world and second coming, I fear, miss the times and places and events and ways in which He is already coming into our common life.

George Macleod, founder of the Iona Community off the coast of Scotland, who preached from the pulpit of this church years ago, put it in a memorable paragraph. He wrote: "I simply argue that the cross be raised again at the center of the market place as well as the steeple of the church...Jesus was not crucified in a cathedral between two candles, but on a cross between two thieves: on the town garbage heap: at a crossroad so cosmopolitan that they had to write his name in Hebrew and in Latin and in Greek... at the kind of place where cynics talk smut, and thieves curse and soldiers gamble. Because that is where he died and that is what he died about. And that is where churchmen ought to be and what churchmen should be about."

The bridesmaids in the story missed Him because they weren't prepared. The people of Jerusalem missed Him because they were looking for another kind of Messiah. Our world misses Him still because we continue to look in the wrong places. He didn't want a throne - and He still doesn't. He didn't want to be High Priest and I can't imagine that He's much interested in descending in a bunch of clouds. What this parable and Palm Sunday say to me is that Jesus Christ wanted and wants His people to accept His Lordship and to articulate His Lordship in the city, the world, the secular arena in which life is lived. He doesn't want to be Governor of the State. He wants to be the Lord of the consciences or those who run the State and those who vote for those who run the State. We miss Him because Palm Sunday keeps happening over and over again. Let me suggest to you where I think He is: not on the 700 Club, or any of the electronic Jesuses you can meet on television, including the one which will be on to-night - one done with great sensitivity and authenticity. But even the best television Christ is still a media event, a little historical, to be sure, but punctuated with swells of violins in case you miss the point. That isn't the Christ of Palm Sunday. I think Palm Sunday means that He shows up in the hearing room in the State House where the fate of the mentally retarded and mentally ill is determined. I think Jesus Christ will be there when the matter of education for the children of the state is discussed. That's what coming to Jerusalem means. I think He'll be at City Hall and the County Jail and the Court-rooms. I think He is present wherever the important decisions about future priorities for our nation and world are made. He may not always be acknowledged, but

if Palm Sunday means anything, it is that He will be there. I think Jesus Christ becomes incarnate in His people: I think He is present here when we gather in His name. But I think you and I miss Him if this is the only - or even the primary place - we look for Him.

Let me tell you where else I find Him. He is present wherever people are hurting. I find Him in hospitals, by the bedside of critically ill people: people who testify out of pain, that a strong arm is holding them: that they aren't afraid: that darkness isn't dark any more: that death no longer holds power over them because someone has walked right into the city of death and demonstrated His Lordship - even there. That, I believe, is how deeply Jesus Christ comes into our life. That is what I believe this day means.

Ten bridesmaids were waiting. So were the people of Jerusalem. And so, in many ways, are we. In one of Samuel Beckett's better known works, Waiting for Godot, two men are waiting during the entire play: talking, planning and waiting. The identity of Godot is never revealed. Is it God? The name lends itself to that interpretation. Or are they waiting for death? Or do they simply enjoy waiting, having long forgotten who or what is supposed to be coming. It is an intriguing literary puzzle. Beckett forces the playgoer to think about what he or she is waiting for and whether, in fact, the wait has become a goal in itself. The philosopher Pascal noted that "we never really seek for things; what we enjoy is the search for things." And German theologian Helmut Thielicke asks "whether we ever understand ourselves as well as in the realization that all of us together, Christian and Pagan, young and old - are waiting for something." (The Waiting Father, p.170).

That something is the same for everyone, essentially. It is happiness, fulfillment, wholeness. It is self-actualization, self-realization, living to the full extent of our potential. It is the sense that life is not passing one by. It is at-oneness with self, others, world and God. It is what the Bible calls salvation. We are, each in his or her own way, waiting for the Messiah.

The Good News of Palm Sunday is that the wait can be over. The Good News of Palm Sunday is that He has come into the city: that there is no area of life, no place, no activity which is immune from His coming. There is no area of your life, no problem, no guilt, no hope nor dream in which He refuses to involve Himself: there is nothing about you or me that lies outside the purview of His love and caring and healing. The radical news is that Jesus Christ is the one who came - and the one who continues to come into your life and mine.

We have an advantage those Jerusalem crowds years ago did not have. We look back at Palm Sunday through the events of crucifixion and resurrection. We know what happened. We know that one week from today the real victory is celebrated.

On this day our Lord Jesus Christ came to the city. As we reflect on that fact, may we acknowledge that He is the one who comes to the vital center of our life and our personal lives. May our Hosannas today acknowledge - in humility and simplicity and faith - His Lordship.

Amen.

Help us, Father, to see the significance of this day. May we be prepared for our Lord's coming, in our city and in our lives: through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.